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ABSTRACT

One explanation for unexpectedly low stress levels among assistant principals may lie in "administrative attribution theory." The demand for school discipline by the public, school boards, teachers, and students should induce high levels of stress in assistant principals, because they are usually responsible for discipline enforcement, but a recent study found that the assistant principalship was not stress-inducing. Administrative attribution theory proposes that administrators assign causality to events based on the perceived intent or motivation of the persons involved. Assistant principals' opportunity to assign intent to misbehaving students may reduce the stress they might otherwise feel. A survey of 24 assistant principals tested whether, in six hypothetical disciplinary cases, they would vary the severity of the punishment according to the motivations they attributed to the perpetrators. The results showed the assistant principals punished most severely those students to whom they attributed motivations of self-gain. These results indicate the assistant principal is psychologically free in enforcing discipline. This psychological freedom is stress-reducing and thus may help explain why assistant principals experience low levels of stress. (RW)

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ON DISCIPLINE: THE PRODUCTS AND PROCESS

James Frasher

One of the most persistent concerns harbored in this nation regarding public schools is discipline or the perceived lack of it. Concern over the discipline phenomenon seems to culminate in secondary schools, where educators must deal with children in their adolescent years. Many school administrators have acknowledged the importance of this problem by designating an assistant principal—and frequently there is only one—as the assistant principal in charge of discipline. Because the success or failure of the holder of that position is believed to be extremely important to the effectiveness of the school, and because the position is such a highly visible one, it may very well constitute the most critical administrative position in the public schools.

It may be inferred that the public, and frequently the school board, are likely to feel that discipline is too lenient. It may be assumed that teachers who send a student to the assistant principal's office expect, perhaps even demand, swift and equitable punishment. It has even been shown that secondary school students themselves feel that discipline is not strict enough. As a consequence, the assistant principal may be expected to feel considerable pressure to rule with an "iron fist," demonstrating the existence of law and order.

On the other hand, one must consider students' rights and the threat of court action in the event of unjust disciplinary action as well as the psychological need of most assistant principals to see themselves as fair. In addition, it seems appropriate to assume that the enforcer role played by the assistant principal is a long psychological distance from the educator's projected image as a helper in a helping profession.

Conventional Wisdom

According to current knowledge about stress inducement, these role conflicts and contradictions are factors which may contribute to stress symptoms. The obvious implication for the position of assistant principal for discipline is that it constitutes a stress-inducing step in the career ladder of educational administrators. This assumption was supported by Everson's study of the assistant principalship.[1]

All but one of the 44 assistant principals in charge of discipline in a major metropolitan area participated in this study. The researcher sought to identify job-related stress factors. Five normed survey instruments—the Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale, the Somatic Complaints Index, the Job Satisfaction Index, the Family Problems Scale, and the Basic Nature of Man Scale—were administered to determine the stress factors involved in the role. Each respondent was interviewed to isolate specific stress-producing elements of the role.[2]

Everson found that more often than not the position's responsibilities are not stated in the form of written job descriptions, that most incumbents had been sought for the position rather than seeking the position, and not one of the respondents saw the position as a career goal. Moreover, the majority of persons holding the position reported that their educational training did not prepare them for their duties. The descriptive data indicate that the position of assistant principal in charge of discipline is a perfect model for the production of stress. The position was described as a crisis-oriented, sadistic, undesirable, undefined, middle management hazard in the career ladder of educational administrators.

Unconventional Findings

The most significant and at the same time the most confounding finding of Everson's study was that the assistant principalship, which might be described above as a prototypical stress inducing position, was in fact a nearly stress-free position. He reported the following conclusions:

> . . . the assistant principals in the study did not report any greater anxiety than their principals and other comparison groups. They actually reported less anxiety than teachers and psychology students.
>
> . . . the assistant principals did not experience significantly greater numbers of psychosomatic disorders than the other comparison groups. The mean score for assistant principals was actually *lower* than all of the other groups tested.
>
> . . . the assistant principals did not report greater job dissatisfaction than the other comparison groups. They reported less job dissatisfaction than three of the middle management comparison groups.
>
> . . . the subjects indicated that they were not bored with their jobs . . . the conclusion was that the assistant principals were satisfied with their jobs.
>
> . . . the assistant principals did not report greater family problems as a result of job stresses than their building principals.
>
> . . . the job experiences of the assistant principals for discipline did not change their views about the basic nature of man.[3]

Everson's findings were clear. The assistant principalship for discipline position was *not* stress inducing. Given the previously delineated factors that argue otherwise, the question becomes, "*Why* is this not a stress-inducing position?"

In Search of an Explanation

The answer to this question apparently does not lie in other aspects of the position dominating the assistant principal's attention. Everson's subjects were indeed in charge of discipline, with an average of 73 percent of their professional work day spent on discipline or discipline-related activities.[4]

In order to gain some insight into this dilemma, an examination of the disciplinary process was undertaken. As a rule, the accused is taken or sent to the office. The assistant principal receives the charge and assigns the punishment. Our knowledge of the process itself is reminiscent of the input→black box→output model. We know very little about what actually occurs as the assistant principal proceeds from the input (the charge) to arrive at the output (punishment or disposition of the case). Does the disciplinarian react as a victim of fate to the multiple sources of pressure that dictate expected behaviors or does the disciplinary process actually allow sufficient freedom for this individual to maintain control of his or her psychological environment?

The contradictions inherent in the disciplinarian's task, namely, conflicting pressures from the public and from teachers, the psychological need to be fair and consistent, and the legal ramifications all suggest that educators might employ an objective format process for discipline as are found with regard to instructional grouping, grading, promotion, and graduation. While it can be argued that "objectifying" the disciplinary or punishment process would greatly simplify the task, such action would run contrary to judicial tradition and very likely prove unworkable. That judicial tradition is to consider not only the behavior but the intent of the actor as well. In fact, in some circumstances in our society, it may well be that others' assumptions concerning one's behavior are more important than the behavior itself.

The importance of societal attributions of an individual's behavior can be illustrated through a familiar example from our legal system. Justice for taking the life of another human being may range from total absolution to capital punishment. The basis for the choice of retribution lies with a peer decision regarding the cause or intent and circumstances of the defendant's action—not with the actual ending of the victim's life.

The school discipline setting has much in common with the judicial setting. The disciplinarian assumes the role of judge and jury to the offender, assessing guilt or innocence and assigning punishment or exoneration. Just as the jury's perceptions of intent are influential in making their disposition of a criminal case, the disciplinarian's perceptions of a student offender's intent are likely to affect the action taken.

It is through the consideration of this factor, i.e., the *attribution of intent*, that I propose it may be possible to resolve the question of why the assistant principal for discipline remains relatively stress free although constantly confronted with highly stressful conditions and pressures. Specifically, administrative attribution theory provides the framework for such a hypothesis.[5]

Administrative Attribution Theory

Attribution theory may be subsumed within the general psychological category of cognitive processing models of behavior, which propose that human beings select, internalize, and utilize intellectual processes in responding to information and experiences and in making decisions for behavior. Attribution theory specifically proposes that individuals engage in "naive" psychological analysis of behavior, i.e., they apply cognitive processes in assigning causality for events they experience or observe. These causal attributions determine or influence their actions, attitudes, and feelings.

In attempts to analyze behavior in terms of attributions, psychologists have concluded that the quest for causality is motivated by the need to control. The latent goal in this pursuit is to provide the basis on which one can most successfully manage one's environment to achieve objectives. The consistency of the latent goal of the attribution process with the manifest goal of educational administration, i.e., control, logically implies the application of attribution theory in education administration.

Research and theory formulation from the field of social psychology has led to a number of concepts that have substantial empirical support and are widely regarded as basic elements in the attribution process. Incorporating these concepts into a theory of administrative attribution is important for two reasons. First, knowledge about processes underlying behavior enhances administrators' ability to select and manipulate those elements most likely to contribute to goal attainment. Second, empirical support for these concepts has been established largely in noneducational settings and are, therefore, subject to further validation or refinement.

Although no previous research in a public school setting was found specifically addressing the effect of the offender's attitude on the punishment meted out, research in clinical psychology literature was found which suggested an administrative attribution concept, *augmentation*, in which it was proposed that greater personal responsibility is assigned to an actor when an observer perceives that acts have been motivated to achieve self-gain rather than to avoid self-loss.[6]

In the context of the current discussion of the administration of discipline in the secondary school setting, the following hypothesis was stated: Students whose actions are attributed to self-gain by a disciplinarian will be punished more severely than students committing the same offense but whose motives are attributed to the avoidance of self-loss.

This hypothesis was tested in a study which focused on administrators' perceptions of the attitudes of students sent to the office for disciplinary action.[7] The administrators (assistant principals for discipline) were asked to recommend disciplinary actions for typical cases encountered in secondary schools: (a) talking in class; (b) smoking in a nonsmoking area; (c) kicking and breaking a locker; (d) fighting with another student; (e) class disturbance; and (f) skipping class. Each respondent considered all six cases. However, two forms of the instrument were constructed. The forms differed only in the student motivational statement attached to each incident. In the first form, cases a, b, and c had student statements which reflected self-gain motivation and an aggressive attitude on the part of the students, and cases d, e, and f reflected students' self-protective attitude and an attempt to prevent self-loss (i.e., to save face). The motivational statements were altered for the second form so that half of the respondents made decisions about aggressive students on cases a, b, and c and self-protective students on the remaining cases. The other half of the respondents reacted to self-protective students' attitudes in cases a, b, and c and aggressive students in the remaining cases. The respondents were asked to provide their preferred disposition of each case based on the following Likert-type scale, ranging from least severe to most severe: (1) talk it out; (2) reprimand; (3) stay after school; (4) corporal punishment; and (5) suspend.

Responses from 24 randomly chosen assistant principals were analyzed for each of the two forms of the instruments. There were no significant ranking differences between the two groups in terms of all cases involving only aggressive attitudes or all cases involving only self-protective attitudes.

The general thesis tested in this study was that the degree of severity of punishment would be more related to the assistant principal's perception of the attitude of the student at the moment of the disciplinary action than to the specific act being disciplined. A separate hypothesis was tested for each of the six cases: (a) talking in class; (b) smoking in a nonsmoking area; (c) kicking and breaking a locker; (d) fighting with another student; (e) class disturbance; and (f) skipping class. In each case it was hypothesized that the respondents would recommend more severe disciplinary action for the student who displayed an aggressive attitude and appeared to have been motivated for self-gain.

Each of the hypotheses was supported as stated. Regardless of the nature of the offense described in each case, significantly higher punishment ratings were observed for "aggressive" students than for "self-protective" students.

Discussion

Clearly the assistant principal's assessment of the student's motivational attitude was a much more significant variable in the disciplinary decision than the offensive act. In fact, the disciplinary selection is so highly correlated to the student's motivation that it may indicate the assistant principal, although not a slave to the rule book in matching the punishment to the crime, is indeed slavelike in matching punishment with perception of motivation.

The perception of the perpetrator's motivation, however, is a private act appearing to the assistant principal as allowing an individual rational prerogative. Consequently, the assistant principal is not being pressured or forced in this process, but on the contrary is psychologically free. This psychological freedom is stress reducing, rather than stress inducing. Thus, one possible explanation for the relative absence of stress found among assistant principals in charge of discipline has been suggested.

Furthermore, it is suspected that the disciplinary process is not the only administrative behavior affected by causal judgments. Fortunately, a substantial body of empirical knowledge concerning attribution and its behavioral effects exists in the literature and is available for future tests in efforts to further understand administrative behavior.

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